Time to Clean Up Street Vending

By RENA LEDDY

HUNDREDS of unlicensed street vendors flock to L.A.'s Fashion District on weekends to sell clothing, food, counterfeit goods and animals. They crowd the sidewalks and spill into alleys and streets in this popular downtown shopping district, creating a hazard for pedestrians and leaving litter and food waste.

None of the unlicensed vendors helps pay for the more than $4 million a year spent cleaning the streets, providing security and attracting customers to the Fashion District. All of that is paid by the businesses and

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property owners who support the L.A. Fashion District Business Improvement District. In addition to getting stuck with the bill for cleaning up the mess, the business and property owners are losing customers and revenues to these unlicensed street vendors.

That's why the L.A. Fashion District BID and other business districts across the city have joined more than 1,000 small-business owners, neighborhood associations, other organizations and individuals to seek stricter regulation of street vending. They have formed the Coalition to Save Small Business in response to street vendors' advocacy for changing existing law.

L.A.'s current law limits sidewalk vending to designated vendor zones. However, no such zones exist. Instead of creating and enforcing such zones, sidewalk vendors have asked the City Council to change the law to allow unlimited street vending citywide.

Unlimited citywide vending would mean sidewalk vendors could operate wherever and whenever they wish, with no consideration for residents or the business and property owners who are paying for the services that make BIDs safe, clean and desirable locations to do business.

While we support everyone's right to earn a living, there's already an estimated 50,000 unlicensed street vendors operating in the city. It is unfair to allow unlicensed street vendors – who are not paying rent, utilities, property taxes, regulatory costs or BID fees – to operate in front of a small business that is offering similar items and having to pay all those costs.

To create a level playing field, we urge the council to reject unlimited citywide vending and enforce current laws. But if the council chooses to change existing law, neighborhoods, businesses and BIDs should have the right to choose, through an opt-in process, if they wish to have sidewalk vending.

Limited number

The number of sidewalk vendors should be limited. Street vendors should be required to have liability insurance to protect the city and business owners against slip-and-fall lawsuits on the sidewalks where the vendors operate. Street vendors also should pay for trash removal and their permit fees should cover the cost of enforcement.

Ensuring enforcement of sidewalk vending is fully funded is critical because the city cannot enforce the sidewalk-vending ordinance it has now. In fact, the L.A. Fashion District BID paid close to $18,000 in the past year for the Bureau of Street Services to enforce existing regulations on a few Saturdays, when the bureau is usually closed.

Clean, safe and accessible sidewalks are essential to the street-level retail operations, restaurants and other establishments that are fueling the downtown renaissance as well as the resurgence of Hollywood and other parts of our city. These brick-and-mortar small businesses are essential to vibrant walkable streets and our economy. They are more than 99 percent of employer firms in California and employ half the state's private workforce.

The City Council can show its support for small business, job creation and stronger neighborhoods and business districts by limiting sidewalk vending to the neighborhoods that want it and fully funding enforcement of the regulations governing it.

Rena Leddy is the managing director of the L.A. Fashion District BID, a nonprofit serving a 100block district in downtown Los Angeles.